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THE CONTRADICTIONS OF LITERARY CRITICISM.

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THE fundamental aim of all intellectual education is to awaken the power of independent thinking, and to train the individual judgment. Upon this truism we must invariably fall back for comfort after any survey of the hopelessly contradictory tangle of modern criticism. Only one who has had to guide classes of advanced students through a critical study of the novelists, essayists, and poets of the nineteenth century can begin to conceive the absolute completeness of the contradictions which form the body of "accepted" critical opinion. A teacher, brought to a vivid realization of the fact that good authority may be brought against everything he says, finds it a little hard to shape his own course as a lecturer. Three possibilities are open to him. He may ignore the critics altogether, giving his own judgments only, and basing them exclusively on principles of his own formulation. It is safe to say that few pursue this course, which savors, certainly, of intellectual arrogance. Secondly, the lecturer may cite from the critics only such opinions as coincide with his own views. This is what is usually done, consciously or unconsciously, by university teachers. It gives a settled and final air to the critical *dicta* of the lecturer, and imparts to the student a satisfied feeling that he knows, at last, "what is truth" in this field. Thirdly, the lecturer may frankly admit that every point, without exception, in modern literary criticism is in dispute, and cite the weightiest authorities both *pro* and *con*, on every point he touches. There is no air of finality about this method. The lecturer may, it is true, weigh the evidence and the authorities and pronounce his own judgment. But he knows, and his students know, that an appeal

always lies to the next critic or lecturer. In effect, therefore, this method of teaching literature amounts simply to a clear and systematic statement of the critical problems. Perhaps a student of weak critical decision may be left merely agnostic by such a course. It is, however, the most thorough and honest method, and a reference to the pedagogical principle with which this paragraph begins must justify us to ourselves for following it. Given his thought, not as a categorical positive or negative, but frankly as a problem, with the authorities both for and against, and referred then to the author criticised, and to his own acumen for his decision, the student is at least forced to develop some power of independent literary judgment.

It will be easy to formulate, from a press-full of critical works, complete schedules of these contradictions—concerning the nature of poetry; the function and correct method of the novelist; the general standing of any notable author; the value of any of his larger works, the truth, sincerity, taste, and imaginative insight displayed therein; the truth and power of any given characterization; and each and every other point worthy of consideration. It has proved stimulating to lay such schedules before the student at the beginning of his study of every novelist from Scott to George Meredith, of every poet from Wordsworth to William Morris, and of every essayist from Carlyle and Macaulay to Matthew Arnold and Walter Pater. Now, is it wise that the debatable character of all recent criticism should be hidden from the many? Should he who runs as he reads be left to suppose that the exact rank, and, still more, the exact worth of Dickens and Thackeray, Tennyson and Browning are already forever and immutably weighed and determined? Suppose we invite one of these hasty devourers of the pabulum offered in the “literary column” of the newspaper to weigh and consider a few of the more fundamental, striking, or amusing contradictions which an hour’s search among the “authorities” will bring to light.

Perhaps Tennyson will best serve for illustration, not because the critics are any more at variance about him than about his contemporaries, but because the innocent are rather more given to believe that his exact position in the zenith has been determined. Would it be supposed that, while, out of the books of his admirers, we could, after the usual fashion, select sentences which, taken collectively, would elevate Tennyson at least as high

as Shakespeare, we might also, with little more trouble, choose other sentences from the very same books which, taken collectively, would indicate his proper rank as somewhere below Pope? The fact is that every critic condemns something in this author; only what one condemns the others praise, and *vice versa*. The proof follows; and first as to individual poems:

Is "Maud" a poem great in conception and intellectual content?

YES.	NO.
"Every great poem then—and no poem can be great without intensity of feeling—is also a treasure-house of the intellectual powers, and can be studied, like a universe, from that point of view. 'Maud' is not one of the least of these." ¹	"'Maud' is scanty in theme, thin in treatment, poor in thought." ²

Does "Maud" reach the truth of men and manners?

YES.	NO.
"No poem since Shakespeare seems to show equal power of the same kind, or equal knowledge of human nature." ³	"Its characterizations are not happy." ⁴
"The prose of Dickens and Thackeray did not more firmly grasp real and actual manners." ⁵	"In 'Maud' . . . the author's personality less obviously interposes a false atmosphere between the reader and actual life. But the falsification nevertheless exists. . . ." ⁶

Well, then, is "Maud" a thing of beauty and a joy forever?

YES.	NO.
"'Maud' is so beautiful a poem that the small regrets of criticism are as nothing in comparison with the large delights it gives."	"The pity of it was that this production appeared when Tennyson suddenly had become fashionable. . . . and to this day Tennyson is deemed, by many . . . an apostle of tinsel and affectation." ⁷
"'Maud,' in its joy and sorrow alike, is the loveliest of Tennyson's longer poems." ⁸	

It will be observed that Mr. Stopford Brooke is here most fully quoted in admiration of "Maud" (though it should be added that Mr. H. Buxton Forman is even more enthusiastic, only less concisely quotable), and that Mr. Stedman is most severe in his strictures. We may, however, reverse the position of these two

¹ Stopford Brooke, "Tennyson, His Art and Relation to Modern Life."

² Stedman, "Victorian Poets."

³ B. Jowett, in "Tennyson, A Memoir."

⁴ Saintsbury, "History of Nineteenth Century Literature."

⁵ Taine, "History of English Literature."

⁶ Gates, "Studies and Appreciations."

critical warriors by simply passing on to the "Idyls of the King." Let us, as a sufficiently fundamental question, ask these gentlemen:

Do the "Idyls of the King" display epic nobility of thought? Has Tennyson elevated and ennobled the old story told by Malory?

YES.

"It is the epic of chivalry,—*the Christian ideal of chivalry* which we have deduced from a barbaric source,—*our conception of what knighthood should be*, rather than what it really was; but so skilfully wrought of high imaginings, faery spells, fantastic legends, and mediæval splendors, that *the whole work*, suffused with the Tennysonian glamor of golden mist, seems like a chronicle illuminated by saintly hands, and often blazes with light like that which flashed from the holy wizard's book when the covers were unclasped."

NO.

"Malory's book, though Tennyson decries its morality, is more human, more moral than the 'Idyls of the King.' . . .

"First, the old story of Tristram and Isolt is entirely changed and degraded. . . . No one has a right to alter out of recognition two characters in one of the great poetic stories of the world, and to blacken them. . . .

"Geraint falls too low, and his fall has not sufficient motive. . . . While Enid sits in the room, Lismours drinks and jests and tells loose tales. Geraint is pleased, and bursts into laughter! . . . What follows is worse. . . . *These vilenesses are added by Tennyson to the Geraint of the old tale.*

"The condition of society in the court and country set forth in 'Pelleas and Ettarre' and 'The Last Tournament' is incredibly bad. Rome in its decadence, France under the Regent, were not so wholly evil as Arthur's court. . . . The chief thing that appears is that chastity is impossible."

Upon this theme, indeed, Mr. Stopford Brooke waxes righteously indignant, and speaks warmly and at much more length. All lovers, too, of the Tristram story must feel that Tennyson's debasement of it cannot be too severely condemned. But let us ask of him who runs as he reads, if "vilenesses" are usually added by "saintly hands" to the chronicles they illuminate? And whether a state of society worse than "Rome in its decadence" is really our "Christian ideal of chivalry"? This is certainly a little bewildering, until one gets used to it.

Now, turning from this ethical dispute, we may justly ask a question or two concerning the artistic value of the "Idyls." First:

Do the "Idyls of the King," in form and substance, constitute an epic?

YES.
 "The shape is no longer idyllic, and doubt no longer exists whether a successful epic can be written in a mature period of national literature. We have one here."¹

NO.
 "The 'Idyls' have not the coherence required in the books of an epic."²
 "... It is not an epic. Its form forbids us to call it by that name."³
 "Arthur is not an epic hero, and ... this poem cannot be called an epic."⁴

Having now decided on high authority that the "Idyls" are and are not an epic, there is perhaps only one more question we need ask about them.

Are the "Idyls of the King" Tennyson's greatest achievement?

YES.
 "We come at last to Tennyson's master work."⁵
 "His finest thoughts and finest lines are here. They are his *magnum opus*, and on them his claim to fame rests."⁶

NO.
 "If M. Taine's theory of a decadence in every artist and school of artists is to be applied in this case, the decadence period of Tennyson must be taken as commencing with 'The Idyls of the King.'"⁷

Then there is "In Memoriam." Surely all are agreed in praise of it? Let us inquire:

Is it a poem of profound thought and heart-felt emotion?

YES.
 "It is the central poem of the century, not only in date, but in scope and character. In its complexity and inwardness, its passion pulsing through every vein of thought..."⁸

NO.
 "... Cold and monotonous, and too prettily arranged. He goes into mourning, but, like a correct gentleman, with brand-new gloves, wipes away his tears with a cambric handkerchief..."⁹

There is no repose here for the lover of authority. But, it may be said, at least all will praise Tennyson's shorter poems? We will consider one of them before examining the opinions as to his work in general. Probably, none is more read by the average man than "Enoch Arden."

Is "Enoch Arden" simply and tenderly written?

¹ Stedman, "Victorian Poets."

² Walker, "Age of Tennyson."

³ and ⁴ Stopford Brooke, "Tennyson, His Art and Relation to Modern Life."

⁵ Stedman, "Victorian Poets."

⁶ W. J. Dawson, "Makers of Modern Poetry."

⁷ H. Buxton Forman, "Our Living Poets."

⁸ Vida Scudder, "The Light of the Spirit in the Modern English Poets."

⁹ Taine, "History of English Literature."

YES.

"His similes in 'Enoch Arden,' he said, were all such as might have been used by simple fisher-folk, quoting this as one of the tenderest (he thought) he had written:

'She heard,
Heard and not heard him; as the
village girl,
Who sets her pitcher underneath
the spring,
Musing on him that used to fill it
for her,
Hears and not hears, and lets it
overflow.'"¹

NO.

"Walter Bagehot has pointed out that in no single instance throughout the poem is Tennyson content to speak in the language of simplicity. The phrases are often happy, often expressive, but always stiff with an elaborate word chiseling. To express the very homely circumstance that Enoch Arden was a fisherman and sold fish, we are told that he vended 'ocean-spoil in ocean-smelling osier.'"²

Is the poem true to the realities of men's lives?

YES.

". . . Noticeable, finally, for the loveliness and fidelity of its *genre* scenes."³

"The atmosphere of a remote sea-side hamlet, and of its life from day to day, is fully preserved and felt."⁴

NO.

"Never for a moment in 'Enoch Arden' is the reader brought into touch with real characters or with the real experiences of sailors. . . . The poem has none of the savor of fact. It is lyrically falsified from first to last. . . ."⁵

These statements are assuredly in rather violent opposition, and they might be almost indefinitely multiplied. One more, perhaps the most amusing of all the Tennyson contradictions, must be cited.

Is Enoch a type of the hardy English seaman?

YES.

"Enoch—to speak first of him—is the type of the 'able seamen' of England . . . the mainstay of our navies—a type which has lasted more than a thousand years. . . ."⁶

NO.

"He is a sentimental, soft-hearted dreamer . . . anæmic and semi-hysterical; . . ."⁷

Can it be that the men who sailed and fought under Drake and Hawkins and Nelson, and England's other naval heroes for a thousand years past, have been anæmic and semi-hysterical? Some one has blundered, surely! The temptation is great to continue the citation of these diverting opinions about Enoch, but space forbids. We may, however, for its connection with this

¹ Hallam Tennyson, "Tennyson. A Memoir."

² Dawson, "Makers of Modern Poetry."

³ Stedman, Victorian Poets."

⁴ Stopford Brooke, "Tennyson, His Art and Relation to Modern Life."

⁵ Gates, "Studies and Appreciations."

poem, place here the first of our disputed questions in general Tennyson-lore.

Is Tennyson unfailing in his good taste?

YES.	NO.
"Let me conclude my remarks upon the Laureate's art with a reference to his unfailing taste and sense of the fitness of things. This is neatly exemplified in the openings and especially in the endings, of his idyls." ¹	"So past the strong heroic soul away. And when they buried him the little port Had seldom seen a <i>costlier</i> funeral." ²

A number of critics have called attention to the curious lapse in taste which led Tennyson to add this totally superfluous post-script about the expense of Enoch's funeral, with its unfortunate effect of throwing the accumulated emphasis of the whole poem on that adjective "costlier." The lines themselves, however, are a more pointed comment on Mr. Stedman's particularized praise than anything the critics could say. It may be added that this is not the only instance in which Mr. Stedman has strikingly exemplified the maxim "*De gustibus.*" For, in considering the "Idyls of the King," he selects for his warmest praise—"there is nothing finer in modern verse . . . nothing loftier"—the particular passage,

"O golden hair with which I used to play
Not knowing! . . ."

which Mr. Stopford Brooke frankly wishes expunged on grounds of taste, namely, that it is "too literal," "too much in the flesh."

The mere lack of space prevents the continuance of extended citation from the field of general criticism. It is the less to be regretted, however, as the contradictions in this domain are chiefly amplifications of opinions implied in the quotations already given. A few of the disputed points should be mentioned, however. First of all, Mr. Stopford Brooke puts his finger on simplicity as the fundamental characteristic of Tennyson and his poetry. The present writer, who had pondered and accepted Matthew Arnold's dictum (in the essay "On Translating Homer") long before Mr. Brooke's study came out, found this the final and severest shock to his reverence for critical authority; for it will be remembered that Mr. Arnold picked out the fundamental

¹ Stedman, "Victorian Poets."

² Concluding lines of "Enoch Arden."

and invariable lack of simplicity in Tennyson as the reason for not inviting him to translate Homer. Some of us had thought that, if nothing else was settled about Tennyson, at least nobody denied that "the very essential characteristic of his poetry is an extreme subtlety and curious elaborateness of expression." Indeed, there remain some whom Mr. Brooke cannot persuade into considering the case reopened.

Another critical antinomy is in the matter of Tennyson's sympathetic understanding of the humble and lowly. Mr. Stedman will have it, *apropos* of "Enoch Arden," that "in study of a class below him, hearts 'centred in the sphere of common duties,' the Laureate is unsurpassed." On the other hand, Dawson, Brooke, Gates and other critics insist upon his alienation from, indeed his aristocratic scorn and contempt for, "the plain people." One might, indeed, suggest that Mr. Stedman's phrase—"a class below him"—indicates at least a subconsciousness on his part that Tennyson was not in brotherly sympathy with the lowly. The poets of human life, whether we look to Burns or Wordsworth, Whittier or Riley, do not make one feel that they were studying a class below them. But this is undertaking a solution of one of these problems, a task which this paper aims at inducing the reader to undertake for himself.

We cannot leave the whole subject, however, without some inquiry into the means of bringing order out of that critical chaos, some little glimpse of which has here been afforded. How shall we determine "what is truth"? We take it for granted that we all believe there is truth here somewhere, if we may only possess ourselves of some means of recognizing it. Shall we simply apply to our own critical consciences for an ultimate decision in each case? Very good, only then no two will announce the same things as truth.

Suppose instead, then, we begin by criticising the critics. Let us, by patient research, determine the personal idiosyncrasy of each critic, and by discounting it work all these contradictions down into smiling agreement. No doubt, much may be accomplished in this way. Some critical biases are easily discernible. Mr. Stedman, for example, is always praising the "art" of an author like Tennyson. But when he particularizes his praise of this "art," he does so altogether in terms of metre, "sinuous alliterations, unique and varying breaks and pauses, the glory

of sound and color," and other such details of technique. But the one essential which makes any work "artistic," as opposed to "mechanical" or "photographic"—namely, what the painters call "composition," and the architects "design,"—does not enter, apparently, into Mr. Stedman's working conception of the "artistic" at all. This, of course, explains why he can say of Tennyson, whose deficiency in large, shaping constructiveness is so unmistakable, that, "as an artist in verse, Alfred Tennyson is the greatest of modern poets." It is this tendency, too, to look exclusively to the polish of the parts, rather than to their grouping in a large and masterly design, which led Mr. Stedman into his hasty proclamation of the "Idyls of the King" as not only Tennyson's masterpiece, but a true epic; an opinion very warmly opposed by the majority of critics, who affirm the "Idyls" to be, on the contrary, considered as a single poem, hopelessly incoherent. "A more lamentable state of things than this it is hard to imagine as the sober and well-considered plan of a great poet," is the opinion expressed by Mr. H. Buxton Forman, after a detailed study of the plot of the "Idyls." It is easy, then, after a thorough reading of Mr. Stedman, to translate his praises of Tennyson's artistic pre-eminence into the single definite phrase "metrical elegance," which, happily, Mr. Stedman himself once uses, and very justly, in speaking of Tennyson's 1832 volume.

The key to some critics is, however, not so easily found. And it must be expected that criticism of the critics will prove as full of debate and contradiction as the criticism of poets and novelists. At the best, this method of attack will probably only shift the scene of battle; while, at the worst, it may lead to "confusion worse confounded," and a mere multiplication of inextricable entanglements. What hope is left?

There is only one more chance,—let us out with it at once,—the systematic application, by some critic of synthetic genius, of the famed Hegelian method. The world still refuses, it is true, to accept, in entire seriousness of mind, the Hegelian postulate that human thought—which is always critical—has in all lines and in all times arrived at truth *via* contradiction. Nevertheless, the thorough-paced application of this maxim by its author to various fields of thought proved it to be one of the most practically illuminative forms assumed by the doctrine of evolution. Applied, for example, to the study of the Greek philosophers,

whose theories seem at first blush quite as chaotic as those of our recent literary critics, the Hegelian method did actually produce therein the semblance of an orderly evolution of thought. There is, then, hope that, if this method should be applied to our literary critics with all the patience, intelligence, and comprehensiveness exercised by its author, we might here also lay hold of some clue which would lead us through these very contradictions to the beauty and fullness of truth. But, until the arrival of this new Hegel, we must look for our only comfort to the educational theorem with which this paper opens.

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